



5 Ways to Withstand Workforce Shortages by Harnessing Technology

A WHITE PAPER FOR PHARMACIES



Automation and technology should never replace face-to-face interactions between a pharmacy professional and their patients.

The Challenge

The demand for skilled pharmacists and pharmacy technicians is surging. Why? One critical reason is the changing patient profile: we have an aging population and a population with higher rates of chronic disease.

Because of this, along with insurance coverage for prescription medication expanding and consumer access to medical care increasing, the use of prescription drugs is increasing, too, which further drives demand for qualified pharmacists.

The demand for these pharmacists to meet additional responsibilities is also multiplying.

Responsibilities include:

- **Administering various vaccines**
- **Maintaining a clean and sanitized pharmacy**
- **Responding to patient and physician inquiries**

Unfortunately, while the demand increases, the supply of pharmacists and pharmacy staff continues to decrease.

The Changing Pharmacist Workforce

In addition to a changing population, market demand factors, such as market growth due to increased competition among retail pharmacies, has led to expanded hours and new store openings. Outside of retail, the complexity of medication management in hospital, long term care, and home health settings is only getting more complex.

Some factors driving this include:

- Increased complexity of medication management in the hospital, long term care, and home health care settings
- Increased demand for clinical disease management in outpatient settings
- Increased responsibilities in assuring quality in all steps of the drug use process and in prevention of medication errors

The increasing demand for clinical disease management in outpatient settings begs for an expanded and qualified workforce of pharmacy professionals. The increasing responsibility of assuring quality in all steps of the drug use process and preventing medication errors, only makes the pharmacists' role more critical in today's healthcare environment.

Unfortunately, the practices and systems looking to hire the right people to fulfill these needs are struggling to do so.

Health systems and hospitals in particular are experiencing severe shortages of pharmacy technicians. Pharmacy administrators have reported in a recent survey from the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP), that turnover rates of at least 21% in 2021 and nearly 1 in 10 noted that they had lost 41% or more of their technicians.

How is the evolving workforce of pharmacy professionals impacting this shortage? Some of the critical impact factors include:

- The increasing number of pharmacists seeking part-time employment
- The increasing difficulty recruiting pharmacists to practice in rural areas and other underserved settings.
- Increasing role responsibilities

While pharmacy practices are expanding, the pharmacists' role is expanding, too. Pharmacists are spending increasing amounts of time on verifying insurance and managing aspects of third party payments.

For the pharmacy staff who are on-the-job, all of these factors and more have led to increased burnout and turnover.

Pharmacy team members have to re-align their focus, continuously, throughout the workday to make the most efficient use of their time. This type of multitasking can lead to decreased attention, energy, and the ability to focus on the task at hand. Multitasking can also lead to potential errors that affect patient quality of care. The resulting amount of extra stress put on the entire team, may ultimately end in staff members leaving their positions, only worsening this continuous cycle.

There's hope. By embracing technology and streamlining processes, pharmacy leads can better enable their teams to manage the workload, thereby reducing burnout and the subsequent turnover.

The Impact on Patients

According to IQVIA, patients visit pharms 10x more than other healthcare providers, meaning the pharmacist's role truly has expanded.

The pharmacy staffing shortage doesn't just impact pharmacies, it also affects patients. With pharmacists often being the most accessible healthcare provider and a trusted source for information, it's no wonder patients visit pharmacies so often to get assistance with their healthcare needs.

As empowering as this is for the pharmacy, this can be a double edge sword. The additional demands placed on the pharmacy by patients, may lead to a further backlog of work that can't be tackled. This can result in longer patient wait times and delays in treatment that can cause an exacerbation of a patient's illness. A busy and understaffed pharmacy has a limited ability to assist each individual patient.

In short, some patients experience:



Longer wait times



Inability to get prescriptions



Delayed treatment resulting in exacerbated illness



Limited availability of staff to assist them

The Impact on Pharmacy Operations

Proactively consulting with every patient and offering supplemental services creates further demands on time. With all of the demands placed on pharmacies, it can be a struggle to stay afloat and avoid burnout among your team members. This is truly a long term problem that will only increase as patient needs grow more complex and staff responsibilities continue to expand. In addition, salaries for supporting staff and technicians are below other less demanding jobs, which has resulted in technicians leaving and/or creating difficulty in recruiting new staff.

Increased reliance on pharmacy staff for consultation and supplemental services is also placing additional demands on time. Burnt-out teams create more errors, safety concerns and more staff shortages. Sadly, this is going to be a long-term problem because:

Patient needs are growing more complex

Staff responsibilities are only increasing

5 Ways to Cope with Staffing Shortages by Harnessing Technology

The good news? There's hope. By embracing technology and streamlining processes, pharmacy leads can better enable their teams to manage the workload, thereby reducing burnout and the subsequent turnover. While technology shouldn't be a replacement for interaction with your staff and patients, it should be a tool to allow you the time to spend with your staff and patient.

38% 38% of employers implemented internal technician training programs.

54% Generally, technicians reported strong job satisfaction, with approximately 54% citing their desire to help patients as a motivation to stay.



Optimize Purchasing

The pharmacy purchasing ecosystem is not designed for transparency, making it:

- Time-consuming
- Tedious
- Frustrating
- Costly

Here are two questions to ask yourself:



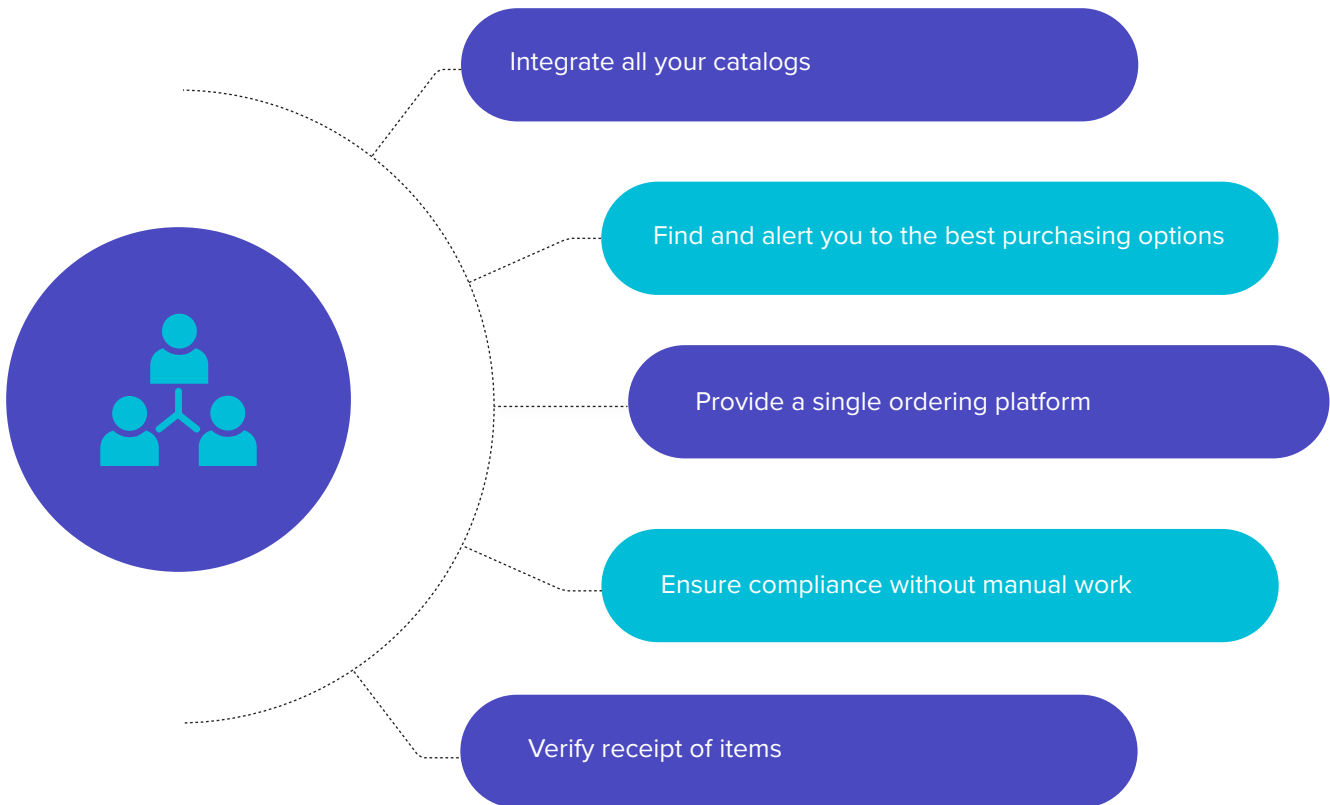
Are you always finding the best purchasing options?



Are you spending too much time and energy on purchasing?

Fewer staff means you're multitasking more than ever, so try to make as many tasks as easy as possible by automating the right parts. If you answered "yes" to either of the above questions, it's time to optimize your purchasing.

You should ensure your current solution is able to:



The right technology will combine all of these features while integrating with your processes and systems, thus optimizing your purchasing process, saving you money and saving your staff time.

Ensure Continuity with Purchasing

It's of the utmost importance to train pharmacy team members to perform specific daily tasks in an efficient manner. Depending on staffing and availability, there may only be one person who handles a specific task such as purchasing: a single person who is the sole keeper of all of the knowledge and expertise that goes with performing that specific task every day.

But what do you do when this highly-trained person becomes ill or wants to take time off? Does your team struggle when the sole keeper of all of the purchasing knowledge and expertise is not available? Even with the best manual documentation, there can still be gaps in documentation.

You can't download an employee's brain, and even the best manual documentation will miss things.

In order to ensure continuity with purchasing, it's essential to have a system in place that can provide a safety net or guardrails against losing needed information. Data needs to be easily accessible by your entire team.

When choosing the right pharmacy system to store your data, it's critical that you ask yourself some important questions:



Can the system recommend optimal drug products for my pharmacy based on dynamic data that is populated on a daily basis?



Are these "optimal products" informed by purchasing data?



Does the system require a reason when substituting an item outside of the "optimal list" so I can track those changes?

These are important considerations to consider when choosing a pharmacy purchasing system. Maintaining your data in the right system can easily reduce the overall stress in the pharmacy and the time your team spends scrambling to track down pertinent information. Ultimately, this aids in reducing costs, avoiding interruptions, preventing errors and even eliminating employee burnout.

Bottom Line: Set yourself up so you can rely on easily accessible data (rather than an individual's memory).

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Streamline Purchasing Workflows

Receiving products, verifying invoices, updating accounts payable, ensuring vendor compliance, filing reimbursements/ rebates, following up on requests and issues...It's a lot! And it adds up to:

- More hats
- More multitasking
- More time
- More tedium
- More burnout

If you have more jobs to do (including all the things you didn't learn in pharmacy school) why not make those jobs easier? It's time to streamline more of your workflows. When it comes to purchasing, consider accounts payable integration.

Accounts Payable integration means a system that can:

- Link purchase orders, invoices, deliveries, receipts and rebates
- Confirm receipt of products at the correct price
- Update GL, inventory and other operations in real time
- Check all invoices are paid on time

Your A/P system should integrate with your purchasing system so that data is part of one process. What are the benefits? For starters, A/P integration:

				
Boosts efficiency of your processes and optimizes how you use your time	Ensures you're getting what you ordered at the correct price	Reduces rogue spending due to incorrect invoices, receiving wrong items or unexpected vendor substitutions	Helps you avoid switching between systems or hustling between terminals and receiving areas	Increases transparency into your processes, reducing wasted time

Also consider solutions for your pharmacy with mobile capabilities that let you accomplish core tasks where your work actually is.

Automate More of Your Inventory Process

Here's another example where you may have a single team member with the knowledge to manage a critical function: inventory management. If a single team member has specific knowledge about managing your inventory, how prepared are you if that team member isn't there?

Consider:

- Individual patient needs
- Recommended items beyond price considerations
- Static NDCs
- Estimated average monthly item usage
- Patient special order requests

This is another example where you should rely on shared data (not personal intuition).

The strategy? Automate more of your inventory process.

Look for automation that lets you:



Track
dispensing
data



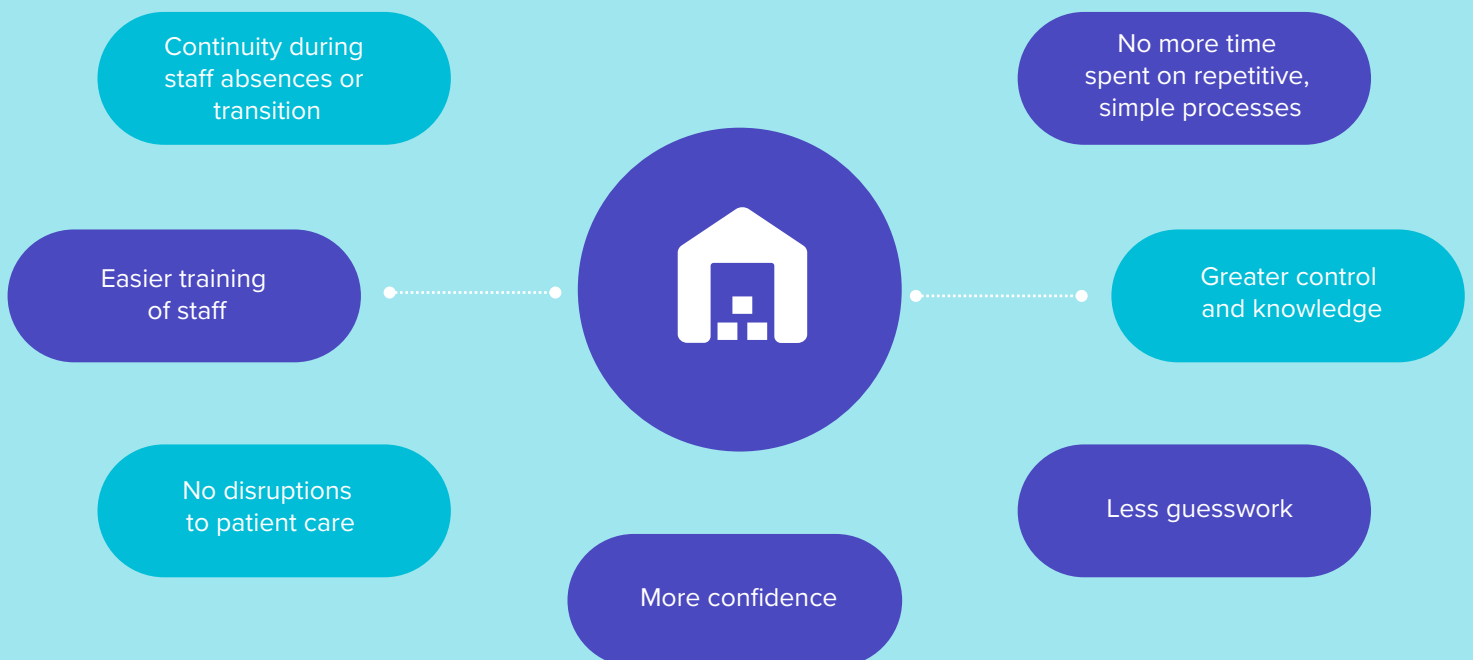
Maintain
min/max for
hand quantities
based on usage



Replenish drug
items at the
product group
level

Integration with purchasing and other processes will further streamline the process and inform each step. Combined with perpetual inventory that updates in real time, your inventory works for you (and not the other way around).

The benefits for inventory management can be substantial, such as:



Balance Your Technology with Humanity

Not all technology is created equal. There are programs out there with endless exceptions that consume hours of training time and leave you without direct support. Automation shouldn't mean having to sacrifice interaction with a person. This type of technology only increases the hours you and your team have to waste trying to be successful.

It's easy to end up with technology that:

- Requires endless exceptions
- Consumes time on training and usage
- Leaves you without direct support
- Loses track of the human touch

This creates more work for staff and takes away their sense of ownership.

Automation and technology should never replace face-to-face interactions between a pharmacy professional and their patients. The clinical knowledge of the professionals on your team cannot be replicated by technology. But the right technology can definitely add value to your team.

In both retail and long term care settings, staff interacts with patients all the time. If you have to focus on systems to the detriment of making personal connections inside and outside your pharmacy, technology isn't adding any value—and is actually making things harder.

When choosing a solution, look for technology rooted in flexible customization, intelligent automation and intuitive design. And remember that you're not just finding purchasing software; you should have a knowledgeable and trusted *partner* behind that technology—just like your patients have one in your pharmacy.

How will you know if you've chosen the *right* technology?



Staff feels empowered
(not replaced)



Their job becomes easier,
and they're not doing additional work



Team members appreciate leadership carefully selecting the right solution based on their needs



They feel less burnout and experience greater job satisfaction



Staff are inclined to stay longer

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In Conclusion

Even though staffing shortages probably aren't going anywhere in the foreseeable future, your staff can feel empowered with the right help.

As a leader, you can provide that help by giving your team a solution that makes their jobs easier and increases job satisfaction by decreasing the time it takes to complete their daily tasks.

In the end, this helps decrease the overall rates of burnout in the pharmacy profession, and it helps you withstand today and tomorrow's workforce shortages.



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Next Steps

Want to learn more about what smarter purchasing can do for your pharmacy?

Let's discuss how your pharmacy can harness smarter purchasing without disrupting your existing process.

Book a Meeting

Let's talk.

Book a 30-minute meeting with us and let's discuss how SureCost will help you save more, stay compliant and work smarter.